

Suicide in View of Kantian Morality

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Abstract

Suicide is a debatable issue in applied ethics. Applied ethics is the branch of ethics concerned with the analysis of particular moral issues in private and public life and try to solve the problem. Suicide is not only the moral issues but it is also the issue of Religions and political and social sciences. Kant is the philosopher, who did not support suicide. For him, through suicide, a man usages himself as a means and destroy his freedom. He considered suicide is immoral and unjust. For Kant suicide is irrational, because the rational autonomy of an agent is negated by this act of self-destruction. But on the other hand, we see that Kant permits the act of suicide on the basis of human dignity. He gives the argument to support his view. According to Kant, suicide can only be rational and permitted when a man can no longer live in accordance with virtue and prudence, and must, therefore, put an end to his life from honourable motives. So, suicide is contradictory to Kant's Formula of Humanity, which is the universal law.

KEYWORDS: Suicide, Morality, unjust, means, humanity

Introduction:

The discipline of ethics chiefly deals with humanity. Taken separately, the official forms of the tenets of ethics seem to be unanimous and unbreakable. The essence of ethics depends on this absoluteness. But in the practical field, the various principles end up in conflict with each other. None of them can be preserved without compromising one or more of the others. In such situations, an agent will choose one definite path through logic and the resulting action will necessarily transgress some other ethical principle.

Certain philosophers have argued that in such cases, only the most important ethical principle matters. But the judgment of importance here often gets confusing. Even the wisest often lose their way.

There is an obvious connection between morality and logic. Morality devoid of logic is reduced to mere chaos. This can be explained in another way: although everything that is moral is logical, the opposite is not true, i.e. everything that is logical is not necessarily moral.

In such cases, every human being decides his duty in accord with his wisdom or the guidance of respectable persons. As a result, certain tenets of ethics are bound to be compromised. A principle loses nothing through the folly of an individual; rather it is the individual who is condemned.

Freedom of will is an important axiom of moral judgment. In its absence, moral 'ought sentences' lose their very meaning. When it is said that "The work X ought to be done", it is meant that the freedom not to do X exists as much as the freedom to do it. This is why the philosopher Kant says in his famous work *Metaphysics of Morals*

that “You ought means you can” i.e. you have the freedom to be able (Thou oughtest means thou canst). We often notice that the necessity to do away with a certain rule arises when it finds itself in conflict with a greater rule. This breaking of a rule is putting that freedom to good use. It is done to preserve the benevolent aspect of morality.

Objective:

Morality is chiefly anthropocentric. If the various tenets of Morality are taken together, they emerge as a set of rules unsurpassable and universal. But in reality, it is often seen that one moral principle contradicts another. Some moral philosophers prescribe a remedy of this confusion by saying that in such cases of conflict, the most important principle should get priority.

Before I present the Kant's view on suicide we should revisit the concept of morality in Kant Philosophy. Kant's ethical theory is known as Rationalism. Rationalism emphasises the claim of reason. Rationalism is the theory of 'duty for duty's sake'. According to Kant, reason or the rational faculty is supreme in man. The moral law, according to Kant, is known intuitively. He distinguished between pure reason and practical reason. Kant regards conscience as the practical reason. The moral is a priori, not empirical.

Morality entails that we are bound by the moral law. It commands us that what we ought to do or what we ought not to do. We know that according to Kant pure practical reason is sufficient to define the moral goodness of an action. Kant argues that practical reason has an ethical function. We notice that Kantian foundational principles of ethics i.e. Kant's categorical imperative, 'act only on maxim you could to become a universal law'. In the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant categorically says that moral principles have a 'foundation' in a single basic principle called 'categorical imperative' for Kant, freedom and pure practical reason are prerequisites for each other. Kantian ethics invites us not to regard another as a means, but always as an end. Maxims or morality are deduced by Kant from the Moral law. They are also self-evident. The Moral law intuitively apprehended by conscience or practical reason is a Categorical Imperative or an unconditional command. This moral law which is a Categorical Imperative is not a directed to an external end, such as pleasure, wealth or knowledge. It is an unconditional command which is not a means to any other end. Morality does not consist in doing something imposed on us from without. Kant says that the moral law as an imperative does not come from outside. It is an internal command. We must do our duty because it is our duty, and not out of any other consideration. Kant says that the moral argument against suicide is stronger than the religious argument. A person who commits suicide is a criminal firstly from a moral perspective because by committing suicide he destroys his freedom. Although Kant says that the religious arguments against suicide is a secondary importance but it does not mean that suicide is not against the God. Kant says: "for the person who commits suicide is guilty against God: suicide, however, is impermissible and abhorrent, not because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it, rather, because it is abhorrent. So all moralist must begin by demonstrating its inherent abhorrence."¹

¹ I. Kant, Lectures on Ethics. P- 148

Kant thinks suicide is immoral and unjust. He believes that morality is founded upon wisdom and freedom. Only humans can independently act with wisdom. Thus nobody can have the right to destroy his own life.

Kant has offered three statements in support of his claim:

a) According to Kant, a moral can be accepted as a moral only when it can be conceived as universal. He instructs people to work in such a way as to establish the essence of their work as a universal law of nature through the willpower of the agent. But suicide can never become equally applicable and acceptable to every human being as a universal law. Therefore it is unjust. An individual may choose the path of suicide for a specific reason in a specific situation. But there is no certainty that that reason will be present in case of everybody else. A personal law cannot be taken as universal.

Suicide contradicts this principle of Kant's, because it evaluates the sorrows, pains, gains and losses of human life as its means, thereby degrading life itself. The dignity and respect a wise and independent human commands are lost on a suicidal person. This is not in accord with Kant's second principle of unconditional command. As a way to end all misery and sorrow, suicide turns the ideas of human dignity and values into mere relativities. Therefore the concept of suicide is certainly not congruous and logical with Kant's principle.

b) One more reason offered by Kant to show the immorality and injustice of suicide is that it is opposed to the notions of an individual's moral responsibility and duty. According to Kant, every individual is bound to accomplish the tasks assigned to him out of his own sense of responsibility and duty. These qualities are by no means inserted from without but rest on the individual's internal behaviour and the quality of his actions. Suicide carries the sign of irresponsibility. This is equivalent to showing disrespect to humanity's wisdom.

Notwithstanding what we say about a person having complete authority over his body and his life and freedom to choose what to do with them, it ought not to be forgotten that man is a social creature. He lives with the family which is also a micro-version of society at large. Naturally, his life is attached to those of the other members of his family. His suicide inevitably affects those people worst. Thus no human can have a complete right to his own life. His freedom ought to be limited in consideration of his responsibilities to his family and society. In a situation where his suicide can make trouble for others, the extent of freedom of personal choice ought to be intensively explored.

Kant argues that the suicidal agent places the release from "painful circumstances"—his happiness above the rational autonomy. The motive for suicide for Kant is self-love or pursuit of happiness. Thus, suicide is motivated by unhappiness. He argues that happiness is contentment with the state of the world in which an agent finds himself in relation to the other things outside him. Misfortune is, therefore, an external cause on which an agent can't influence.

Kant argues that the proper end of rational being is self-preservation. To destroy one's ability to act is in contradiction with objectives of free rational agents as such, and so the suicide is in contradiction with his or her own nature. Kant argues that self-love and self-destruction cannot exist on the same subject.

On the other hand, suicide is contradictory to Kant's Formula of Humanity, which is a universal law: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."² According to Kant, suicide is motivated by misfortune and founded on self-love. The motive for suicide for Kant is self-love or pursuit of happiness. Kant also argues that happiness depends on external factors, so it "can be very defective, and very changeable."

For Kant, "He who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from painful circumstances, he uses a person merely as a mean to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. But a man is not a thing, that is to say, something which can be used merely as means, but must in all his actions be always considered as an end in himself. I cannot, therefore, dispose of in any way of a man in my own person so as to mutilate him, to damage or kill him"³

Kant has proposed that the person contemplating suicide ought to ask himself whether his intention is compatible with the concept of humanity as self-sufficient. If he destroys himself to be free of troublesome circumstances, then he is using himself only as a means to preserve tolerable conditions for his own life till the end. But a person is not an object and ought not to be used only as a means to an end. He ought to have dignity for his uniqueness as he is. Therefore one can never forsake, distort or kill the human within by any means.

Therefore Kant's argument for the impossibility of self-destruction can be outlined in the following manner:

- 1) Suicide is motivated by misfortune and founded on self-love, which means improving one's life.
- 2) It is contradictory to think that we can improve life by destroying it.
- 3) Therefore, an agent should strive to preserve his own life.

According to Kant, self-preservation is one of man's duties towards himself and God. In his *Lectures on Ethics* Kant has argued that "Suicide evokes intense aversion because everything in nature tries to preserve itself." This is true for every creature on Earth. Kant also argues that human nature is self-affirming in the same sense as Spinoza. He talks about preservation of life, and not about the aversion of pain, and living life in pleasure: "No there is not necessary that so as I live, I should live happily, but there is a necessity that so long as I live, I should live honourably." Thus he refused to follow the footsteps of the Carvakas of India. He also says in *Lectures on Ethics* that many things in the world are greater than life. For example, it is more important to live morally than to merely exist. Kant argues that humanity is an objective end. He argues: "Humanity in our person is an object of highest respect and should never be violated by us."

² I. Kant: lecture on Ethics

³ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p-49

Kant also argues that if a man can preserve his life no otherwise than by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather sacrifice it. The preservation of life can't always take the place of the highest duty. It often becomes necessary to sacrifice one's life to preserve one's dignity. According to Kant, suicide can only be rational and permitted "when a man can no longer live in accordance with virtue and prudence, and must, therefore, put an end to his life from honourable motives." He adds that if an agent cannot preserve his life other than by violating the duties to himself, then an agent should sacrifice it, rather than to violate those duties. Kant gives an example of Cato who committed suicide when he realised that he can't escape from Caesar. Cato's suicide is rational because he did it to prevent himself from falling into Caesar's hands and in order to save his honour. But, still, Kant argues that this suicide was not "noble": "If Cato, under all the tortures that Caesar might have inflicted on him, had still adhered to his resolve as steadfast mind, that would have been noble, but not when he laid his hands upon himself."

For Kant suicide is irrational, because the rational autonomy of an agent is negated by this act of self-destruction. He argues that suicidal agent chooses happiness, over the source of all values—rational autonomy. He emphasizes that suicide is a desperate act, rather than a calculated one. For Kant, suicide as the choice of an agent is absurd, because an agent "has employed his choice to destroy the power of choosing itself". Kant argues that if freedom is the condition of life, it cannot be employed to abolish life since it destroys and abolishes itself.

For Kant, suicide is a violation towards an agent duty to himself. "Not to commit a suicide" is a perfect duty, which means that it is the absolute prohibition. For Kant, suicide is immoral, because it is the violation of the humanity, which is a universal objective end.

Kant has opined that suicide is unacceptable from a moral standpoint. According to one of his principles treat everybody rational being including yourself as an end, end never as a means.⁴

Conclusion:

Man is his own destination or goal. Every human has humanity and everyone ought to use that humanity as a destination in itself, and not as mere means to something else. Suicide is unacceptable because in a suicide the suicidal person uses his humanity not as an end in itself but as a means to achieve a different objective. He thinks that he would get out of his life's troubles by killing himself. Here the destination is a state without intolerable misery and the means to achieve that end is suicide. But life is its own goal. Every human being should live by accepting life as it is. Kant says if a person's life is riddled with defeats, endangered, neglected and troubled, and still, that person chooses to live his life out of the sheer good will, accepting life itself as his destination, then that is the proper moral standpoint. Therefore suicide is a moral crime according to Kant.

⁴ **Metaphysics of Morals, I, Kant, Sec-II, P-46**

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